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## President's Letter

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Comparative Literature has been making a come-back I heard recently, which made me reflect on whether it had ever gone away, and if so, where had it been. The doom-laden discourse of a subject in crisis, maybe even in its death-throes has been with us for decades, thankfully without having had any significant impact. When Gayatri Spivak's *Death of a Discipline* appeared a few years ago, I remember feeling a bit like Agatha Christie's Miss Marple and responding to the title with the view that firstly, comparative literature did not look very dead to me and secondly, it is not and never has been a discipline. Comparative literature is a mode of reading, one arrives at comparison, one does not start with it. The more one reads, the more one finds connections between texts, sometimes very obvious connections, at other times more tenuous but, as Matthew Arnold remarked in his Inaugural Lecture of 1857, a text I never stop quoting to my students, 'everywhere there is connection'.

Many of you will have found yourselves in a context where someone asks you what comparative literature means and what exactly you compare. Is it really a subject, is a question that is often heard, especially outside academia. My response to such questioning is to explain that comparative literature looks at how ideas and texts move across cultural and language boundaries, often in unexpected ways. If the questioner seems interested, a few examples can be provided such as: how did Charles Dickens and Jack London become canonical figures in Russia? Why did Aldous Huxley become popular in China? What is the story behind Marie Corelli's success in Thailand? How did the detective novel originate and spread around the world? More recently, we could add thoughts about how Elena Ferrante's novels have become more successful abroad than back in Italy. Once we start to think about such questions and ponder on how texts move and why, we are comparing.

We are also having to take into account the role played by translation in that movement, and for me, the study of translation is intimately linked to comparative literature. When I wrote my introductory book on Comparative Literature back in the 1990s, I went so far as to say that I thought we should consider Comparative Literature not as the over-arching field of which Translation Studies was one strand, but rather as a sub-field of Translation Studies. Looking back, I can see how ridiculous that suggestion was, though it was made at a time when I was trying to have Translation Studies taken seriously by a multitude of sceptics and so being deliberately provocative. For translation too is a mode of reading, and what is of interest and worth investigating is the relationship between the study of translation and the study of comparative literature (and we might add world literature here too) without endeavouring to create an artificial hierarchy between these inter-related areas.

Academics love creating artificial hierarchies, unfortunately. It is a way of defending one's own little patch. When I first started teaching comparative literature back in the late 1970s, I was told very firmly what could and could not be included in the curriculum. Comparisons, I was informed, could

only be made between texts written in different languages. This meant that there could be no comparison at all between literatures from different cultures written in the same language, or in variants of that language. I leave it to you to imagine how absurdly restricting that was, also how such a view marginalized translation. So I began to investigate the origins of Comparative Literature, seeking to understand why there were such strongly held conflicting opinions, and why so many eminent figures had complained about the subject being in crisis.

Meanwhile, of course, comparison was thriving in fields with other labels – postcolonial studies, women's studies, theatre studies, film and media studies, to name but a few. The comparative method of reading was being applied far more widely than in literary studies alone, and it gradually dawned on me that perhaps the defensiveness of some comparative literature people was coming from anxiety about interdisciplinarity, which disturbed the old single subject hierarchy. There was also anxiety about the cultural turn in literary studies and about challenges to the traditional literary canon. Similarly, some of the defensiveness of earlier comparative literature scholars must have been coming from their anxiety about diluting specialist knowledge, about creating a generation that would not be able to claim 'expertise' in any one field. It is also important to remember that for a very long time there was defensiveness about nation-centred concepts of language and literature teaching, vestiges of which still linger in prejudices against reading in translation. More recently, there has been concern about whether comparative literature is overly Eurocentric. There is a long history of breast-beating and defensiveness in comparative literature, hence the harping on about crisis and impending catastrophe.

Benedetto Croce pointed out that all study of literature involves comparison. He was right, to an extent, but nevertheless it is necessary to have a field of study that defines itself by comparing literatures. What makes comparative literature exciting today is that it is genuinely interdisciplinary because it has reached out to other fields. This is another reason why I do not think Comparative Literature is a discipline; it borrows from other disciplines, adapts to new forms and new media, makes methodological shifts and is consequently enriched. Memory studies, life writing, trauma studies, food studies are all recent developments that have a place within comparative literature, for all involve in different ways comparison.

I am enthusiastic about the state of Comparative Literature today, and very honoured to become the President of the BCLA, forty years after I joined the BCLA's first committee. If I have any anxiety, it is not about the state of the field which seems to be flourishing, but about my ability to follow in the footsteps of the other distinguished comparatists who have held the Presidency, most recently the brilliant Dame Marina Warner. What I hope for during my term of office is to see Comparative Literature continuing to prosper through publications, conferences and prizes, for the BCLA to encourage our sadly demoralized colleagues in Modern Languages, and to help younger colleagues to resist the damaging pressures of the REF which stifles innovative interdisciplinary research.

Finally, I would like to pay tribute to two scholars and friends who have been hugely influential in my career, and who died this year: Gideon Toury, who did so much for Translation Studies, and Bernard Bergonzi, Professor of English but a great advocate of Comparative Literature. As we look forward to

working with younger comparatists in the future, it is important also to remember those who helped us on our own pathway.